

## The Quest for Gentility in Prerevolutionary America

### Document A - Excerpts from John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education"

...The other part of ill-breeding lies in the appearance of too little care of pleasing or showing respect to those we have to do with. To avoid this two things are requisite: first, a disposition of mind not to offend others; and secondly, the most acceptable and agreeable way of expressing that disposition. From the one, men are called civil; from the other, well-fashioned. The latter of these is that decency and gracefulness of looks, voice, words, motions, gestures, and of all the whole outward demeanor, which takes in company, and makes those with whom we converse easy and well pleased. This is, as it were, the language whereby that internal civility of the mind is expressed; which, as other languages are, being much governed by the fashion and custom of every country, must, in the rules and practice of it, be learned chiefly of observation, and the carriage of those who are allowed to be exactly well-bred. ...I shall take note of four qualities, that are most directly opposite to this first and most taking of all the social virtues...

The first is, a natural roughness, which makes a man uncomplaisant to others, so that he has not deference for their inclinations, tempers, or conditions. It is the sure badge of a clown, not to mind what pleases those he is with; and yet one may often find a man, in fashionable clothes, give an unbounded swing to his own humor, and suffer it to jostle or over-run anyone that stands in his way, with a perfect indifference how they take it. This is a brutality that everyone sees and abhors, and nobody can be easy with: and therefore this finds no place in anyone, who would be thought to have the least tincture of good breeding. For the end and the business of good breeding is to supple the natural stiffness, and so soften men's tempers, that they may bend to a compliance, and accommodate themselves to those they have to do with.(§143)

I say that, when you consider the breeding of your son, and are looking for a schoolmaster, or tutor, you would not have (as is usual) Latin and logic only in your thoughts. Learning must be had, but in the second place, as subservient only to greater qualities. Seek out somebody, that may know how discreetly to frame his manners: place him in hands, where you may, as much as possible, secure his innocence, cherish and nurse up the good, and gently correct and weed out any bad inclinations, and settle him in good habits....(§147)

### Document B - Earl of Chesterfield, "Letters to His Son on the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman," an etiquette book popular in 18th Century America

Next to manners are the exterior graces of person and address, which adorn manners, as manners adorn knowledge. To say that they please, engage, and charm, as they most indisputably do, is saying that one should do everything possible to acquire them. The graceful manner of speaking is, particularly, what I

shall always holler in your ears, as Hotspur hollered Mortimer to Henry IV, and, like him too, I have simmer to have a starling taught to say, speak distinctly and gracefully...(p. 86)

If care and applications are necessary are necessary to the acquiring of those qualifications, without which you can never be considerable, or make a figure in the world, they are not less necessary with regard to the lesser accomplishments, which are requisite to making you agreeable and pleasing in society. In truth, whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well; and nothing can be done well without attention; I therefore carry the necessity of attention down to the lowest things, even to dancing and to dress. Custom has made dancing sometimes necessary for a young man; therefore, mind it while you learn it that you may learn to do it well, and not be ridiculous, though in a ridiculous act. Dress is of the same nature; you must dress; therefore attend to it; not in order to rival or to excel a fop in it, but in order to avoid singularity, and consequently ridicule. Take great care to be dressed like reasonable people of your own age, in the place where you are; whose dress is never spoken of in one way or another, as either too negligent or too much studied.(p 2-3)

I am most affected to letters upon your subject; the one from Madame St. Germain, and the other from Monsieur Pampigne; they both give so good an account of you...They write that you are not only decorous, but tolerably well-bred, and that the English crust of awkward bashfulness, shyness, and roughness (of which, by the bye, you had your share) is pretty well rubbed off. I am most heartily glad of it, for, as I have often told you, those lesser talents, of an engaging, insinuating manner, an easy good breeding, a genteel behavior and address, are of infinitely more advantage than they are generally thought to be...Virtue and learning, like gold, have their intrinsic value, but if they are not polished, they certainly lose a great deal of their luster; and even polished brass will pass upon more people than rough gold.( p. 10)

I send you here enclosed the draft of the letter which I would have you write to her. I would hope that you will not be offended at my offering you my assistance upon this occasion; because I presume, as yet, you are not much used to write to ladies. A propos of letter writing, the best models that you can form yourself upon are, Cicero, Cardinal D'Ossat, Madame Sevigne, and Comte Bussy Rebutin. Cicero's epistles to Atticus, and to his familiar friends, are the best examples that you can imitate, in the friendly and familiar style. The simplicity and clearness of Cardinal D'Ossat's letters show how letters of business ought to be written; no affected turns, no attempts at wit...For gay and amusing letters, there are none that equal Comte Bussy's and Madame Sevigne's. They are so natural, that they seem to be the extempore conversations of two people of wit, rather than letters which are commonly studied..(p. 17 )

. . . I remind you, that it will be to a very little purpose for you to frequent good company, if you do not conform to, and learn their manners; if you are not attentive to please, and well bred, with the easiness of a man of fashion. As you must attend to your manners, you must not neglect your person; but take care to be very clean, well-dressed, and genteel; to have no disagreeable attitudes, nor awkward tricks...Do take care to keep your teeth very clean, by washing them constantly every morning, and after every meal?...Do

you dress well, and not too well? Do you consider your air and manner of presenting yourself enough, and not too much? Neither negligent or stiff? All these things deserve a degree of care; they give an additional lustre to real merit...A pleasing figure is the perpetual letter of recommendation. It certainly is an agreeable forerunner of merit, and smoothes the way for it. (p. 18)

Have a real reserve with almost everybody; have a seeming reserve with almost nobody; for it is very disagreeable to seem reserved, and very dangerous not to be so. Few people find the true medium; many are ridiculously mysterious and reserved upon trifles; and many imprudently communicative of all they know. The next thing to your choice of friends, is the choice of your company. Endeavor, as much as you can, to keep company with those above you: there you rise, as much as you sink with people below you; for you are whatever the company you keep is...What I mean by low company, which should by all means be avoided, is the company of those, who, absolutely insignificant and contemptible in themselves, think they are being honored by being in your company, and who flatter every vice and every folly that you have, in order to engage you to converse with them. . . (p. 25)

The art of pleasing is a very necessary one to possess, but a very difficult one to acquire. It can hardly be reduced to rules; and your own good sense and observation will teach you more of it than I can...Observe carefully what pleases you in others. and probably the same thing in you will please others...Take the tone of the company you are in, and do not pretend to give it; be serious, gay, or even trifling, as you find the present humor of your company; this is an attention due from every individual to the majority. Do not tell stories in company; there is nothing more tedious and disagreeable; if by chance you know a short story, and exceedingly applicable to the present subject of conversation, tell it in as few words as possible; and even then, throw out that you do not love to tell stories; but that the shortness of it tempted you. Of all things, banish egotism out of your conversation, and never think of entertaining people with your own personal concerns, or private affairs; though they are interesting to you, they are tedious and impertinent to everybody else...Avoid the silly preamble, 'I will tell you an excellent thing,' or, 'I will tell you the best thing in the world.' This raises expectations, which when absolutely disappointed, make the relater of this excellent thing look, very deservedly, like a fool. If you would particularly people, whether men or women, endeavor to find the predominant excellency, if they have one, and their prevailing weakness, which everybody has, and do justice to the one, and something more than justice to the other. Men have various objects in which they may excel, or at least would be thought to excel, and though they love to hear justice done to them, where they know that they excel, yet they are most and best flattered upon those points where they wish to excel, and yet are doubtful whether they do or not...Women have but one object in general, which is their beauty; upon which, scarce any flattery is too gross for them to swallow. Nature has hardly formed a woman ugly enough to be insensible to flattery upon her person. . . (p. 28)

There is another species of learned men, whom though less dogmatical and supercilious, are not less impertinent. These are the communicative and shining pedants, who adorn their conversation by happy quotations of Greek and Latin, and who have contracted such a familiarity with Greek and Roman authors, that they call them by certain names or epithets denoting intimacy...These can be imitated by

coxcombs, which have no learning at all, but who have got some names and some scraps of ancient authors by heart, which they improperly and impertinently retail in all companies, in hopes of passing for scholars. If, therefore, you hope to avoid the accusation of pedantry on the one hand, or the suspicion of ignorance on the other, abstain from learned ostentation. Speak the language of the company that you are in; speak it purely, and unlarded with any other. Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with. Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket: and do not pull it and strike it, merely to show that you have one. If you are asked what o'clock it is, tell it; but do not proclaim it hourly and unasked, like the watchman.(p. 53)

Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it; and I could heartily wish, they you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and in manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things, and they call it being merry. In my mind, there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter. True wit, or sense, never yet made anybody laugh; they are above it...I know a man of very good parts, Mr. Waller, who cannot say the commonest thing without laughing; which makes those who do not know him, take him at first for a natural fool...They are ashamed in his company, and so disconcerted that they do not know what to do...These (vulgar habits and awkwardness), though not criminal indeed, are most carefully to be guarded against, as they are great bars in the way of the art of pleasing. Remember that to please is almost to prevail, or at least a necessary previous step to it. You, who have your fortune to make, should more particularly study this art.( p. 58)

I do not doubt that you are improved in your manners by the short visit that you have made at Dresden, and the other courts, which I intend that you should be better acquainted with, will gradually smooth you up to the highest polish...The manner of doing things is often more important than the things themselves; and the very same thing may either be pleasing or offensive, by the manner of your saying or doing it. *Materiam superabat opus*, is often said of works of sculpture...(p. 72)

People of low, obscure education cannot stand the rays of greatness, they are frightened out of their wits when kings and great men speak to them; they are awkward, ashamed, and don't know what to answer; whereas *les honnetes gens* are not dazzled by superior rank: they know, and pay all the respect that is due to it, but they do it without being disconcerted, and can converse just as easily with a king as with any one of his subjects...The characteristic of a well-bred man is to converse with his inferiors without insolence, and with his superiors with respect and ease. He talks to kings without concern, without the least concern of mind or awkwardness of body. Awkwardness of carriage is very alienating; and a total negligence of dress and air is an impertinent insult to custom and fashion. Your exercises of riding, fencing, and dancing, will civilize and fashion your bodies and limbs, and give you, an air of the gentlemen. (p. 74)

Document C - Excerpt from Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful"

The next property constantly observable in such objects is Smoothness. A quality so essential to beauty, that I do not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth. In trees and flowers, smooth leaves are beautiful; smooth slopes of earth in gardens; smooth streams in the landscape; smooth coats of birds and beasts, in fine women, in smooth skins; and in several sorts of ornamental furniture, in its smooth and polished surfaces. A very considerable part of the effect of beauty is owing to this quality; indeed the most considerable. For take any beautiful object, and give it a broken and rugged surface, and however well formed it may be in other respects, it pleases no longer. Whereas let it want ever so many of the other constituents, if it wants not this, it becomes more pleasing than almost all others without it. This seems to me so evident, that I am a good deal surprised, that not who have handled the subject have made any mention of the quality of smoothness in the enumeration of those that go to the forming of beauty. For indeed any ruggedness, any sudden projection, any sharp angle, is in the highest degree contrary to that idea.